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ABSTRACT

This digest describes types of education programs for gifted and talented children and considers educational acceleration for this population. It reviews such acceleration alternatives as having a child skip a grade, having a child take advanced courses with older students in particular subjects, and having the child tutored and advanced in given subjects either individually or in small groups. The digest considers whether acceleration is harmful academically, emotionally, or socially; what educators think of educational acceleration; how parents know if their child should accelerate; and steps in making the decision to accelerate. The digest provides a list of seven additional information sources. (JDD)

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Should Gifted Students Be Grade-Advanced?

Sharon J. Lynch

Intellectually gifted and academically talented students are able to learn material rapidly and understand concepts deeply. Keeping them challenged and learning to their capacity can require changes in their regular school programs. Education programs for children identified as gifted and talented take many forms: pull-out programs offering educational enrichment, honors classes, after school and summer programs featuring special course work, and mentor programs in which children are matched with professionals in the community for special learning experiences.

Sometimes, gifted youngsters may be so advanced in knowledge and so clearly operating at an intellectual level beyond that of their same-age peers that educational acceleration is a realistic and desirable alternative to normal grade-level work. Educational acceleration is often perceived simply as placing a child one or more grades ahead with older children. For instance, a child who has completed the fourth grade may be double-promoted to the sixth, skipping fifth grade entirely. Sometimes, if children are especially talented in one subject area (most often mathematics, science, or English), they may be allowed to take advanced courses with older students in that subject while remaining in their own grade for other subjects. Another alternative is to have gifted children tutored and advanced in given subjects, either individually or in small groups of children with similar talents. For instance, a group of high school students might meet for advanced mathematics classes twice a week with a professor from a local university.

These arrangements are all appropriate for children who are intellectually and academically capable of learning at a faster pace and in greater depth than their same-age peers, and who are motivated to do so. Insisting that gifted and talented students remain with their age-mates at all costs may exact too high a cost from them. It may result in boredom and daydreaming, poor study habits, behavior problems, or school avoidance. But the decision to allow a child to accelerate educationally is one that must be made for each child, taking into account his or her intellectual and emotional needs and the services the school can provide.

Is Educational Acceleration Harmful to the Child Academically?

The majority of studies have shown that children who have been educationally accelerated do not suffer academically. Their grades are higher than those of their peers who chose not to accelerate, and they compare favorably with those of older students in their classes. Accelerated students also report heightened interest in and enthusiasm for school.

But Won't There Be Gaps in the Child's Knowledge?

If children skip one or more grades, they may occasionally encounter unfamiliar material from the skipped grade. Therefore, arrangements should be made to allow the children to cover any such material without penalty as it is encountered. Because there is repetition in normal curricula, gaps occur less often than one might think and are seldom a significant problem for the gifted and talented student, who learns quickly and well.

Is Educational Acceleration Harmful to the Child Emotionally or Socially?

This aspect of educational acceleration seems to worry parents and educators most. In general, children who are well-adjusted and socially at ease before accelerating report having two groups of friends—they belong to a circle of older students, but they also retain friendships with children who are the same age.

Children who are socially withdrawn or who have difficulty making friends may experience similar problems when placed with older children. On the other hand, there are cases in which a gifted child is more comfortable with older children than with age-mates. This may be true more often for girls than boys. The receiving classroom teacher in an accelerated setting can help the younger student find a niche among the older students.

What Do Educators Think of the Educational Acceleration Option?

Research about acceleration consistently documents positive effects, both academic and social, for children who have accelerated, but educators have been slow to embrace the option. Fears about social and emotional developmental problems for these children are common. However, people who specialize in working with gifted and talented children and teachers and parents who have had personal experience with educational acceleration tend to be more positive.

How Do Parents Know If Their Child Should Accelerate?

If children's standardized test scores, particularly achievement test scores, are many grades above level or off the charts entirely, they are good candidates for acceleration. If a child who was previously an avid student begins to complain of

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boredom or starts misbehaving in school, it may be an indication that he or she needs additional challenges (but remember that any child may be bored or have behavior problems). Ideally, the decision to accelerate should be mutual—the child, parents, and school officials all agreeing that it would serve the child well. The school psychologist or Individualized Education Program (IEP) committee should be consulted early in the process.

When Should One Be Cautious About Acceleration?

If the child under consideration for acceleration is physically or emotionally immature, is pushed into the process by adults, or receives constant negative feedback at school from peers or educators, problems could occur. If the school accelerates students routinely so that an accelerated youngster does not stand out as peculiar and has a small support group of similar youngsters, then chances for an easy adjustment increase.

A child who has been accelerated may find that he or she is no longer the best in the class. Both parents and the child should be ready for this. Parents should be supportive, but never put undue pressure on the gifted and talented child to perform—certainly not when he or she is adjusting to a new environment. The decision to academically accelerate a child may be reversed at any time if it appears not to be working out for the child academically, socially, or emotionally. Adults should help children in this situation understand that the change is not a failure.

What About Acceleration in a Single Subject?

This option tends to meet with less resistance from educators than grade-skipping because children still take most classes with their age-mates, alleviating concerns about social problems. Here, continuity is crucial. Accelerating students one year, only to have them repeat the material the next, is no solution. Teachers or curriculum specialists can be helpful in determining what aspects of a subject are covered in each grade. Accelerated students may need to make special arrangements to travel to a junior high or high school, or even take a college course before high school graduation. It is important to obtain the cooperation of the school district throughout the child's educational career. Transportation problems may prove more difficult to solve than academic or social ones.

What Are the Steps in Making the Decision To Accelerate?

Assuming that parents and student agree to explore this option, parents might begin by discussing it with the school's coordinator for the gifted and talented, guidance counselor, or principal—whichever person knows the child best. The classroom teachers' opinions also should be sought. Next, the child's academic potential and social and emotional adjustment should be evaluated by a school psychologist. The final decision will probably be made by the school's IEP committee or the principal. It helps to have the enthusiastic support and understanding of the teachers who will be working with the accelerated child, as well as commitments for continuity and coordination from school authorities. Parents considering this option may find it helpful to contact the coordinator for gifted and talented education at their state department of education.

Sources

Most of the following references—those identified with an ED or EJ number—have been abstracted and are in the ERIC database. The journal articles should be available at most research libraries. For a list of ERIC collections in your area, contact ACCESS ERIC at 1-800-LET-ERIC.

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